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SUBJECT: CHIRAC AVOIDS DEMOCRACY TALK, FOCUSES ON 1915

Classified By: CDA A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) French President Jacques Chirac avoided tough democracy talk during his first visit to Armenia September 29 through October 1, preferring instead to focus on crowd-pleasers like "genocide" recognition. Chirac also told reporters that Nagorno Karabakh settlement talks should remain the purview of the OSCE Minsk Group, and not the United Nations. The French president received wide, positive press coverage, though the real star of the weekend was arguably singer Charles Aznavour, Armenia's best-loved son, who gave a concert in Yerevan's central square September 30.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The streets of Yerevan, normally a minefield of potholes lacking discernible lane markings, received a complete overhaul before Chirac's arrival to mark the start of "The Year of Armenia in France." Traffic was backed up outside the Embassy for weeks as workers repaired the roads and hung French flags from the lamp posts.

CHIRAC WINS ARMENIAN HEARTS

¶3. (C) Chirac avoided any tough talk on democracy during his visit, opting instead to implant himself firmly in the hearts of Armenian society with his public comments on "genocide" recognition, which received wide coverage in the French and Turkish press as well as the Armenian press. French Ambassador Henri Cuny told us Chirac did not discuss any bilateral issues during his private meetings. Many news outlets reported that, at the end of a visit to the Armenian Genocide Memorial, Chirac signed the memorial book with just one word: "Remember." During his joint press conference with Kocharian, Chirac called the Armenian people, "A people whose destiny will forever be marked by the genocide of which it was a victim." He said Turkey must "acknowledge the mistakes of its past" and recognize the events of 1915 as genocide in order to enter the European Union. "A country, a nation, always grows by recognizing the errors which it has committed," Chirac said. Kocharian's own comments were more measured, saying, "We would like our interests to be discussed" in the EU's accession discussions with Turkey.

ON THE MINSK GROUP AND NK

¶4. (U) Chirac also expressed his confidence in the OSCE Minsk

Group's work to settle the NK conflict, and said it would be counter-productive to involve other international organizations, such as the United Nations. "I think that if agencies that are less aware of the history and niceties of the conflict start dealing with the settlement ... that might complicate the situation," he said. Kocharian echoed Chirac's statement, saying NK should be left to "professional teams of mediators."

JACQUES WHO?

¶5. (U) Despite the glowing press coverage of Chirac's visit, the real star of the weekend was singer Charles Aznavour, Armenia's best-loved son. His concert in Yerevan's central square on September 30 was attended by more than 100,000 fans, including Chirac and Kocharian. Herds of police officers barricaded the streets surrounding the square. When Poloff asked police officer whether the streets had been closed in preparation for Chirac's arrival to the square, he gave a blank look, and said it was just "security for the concert" (read: for Aznavour).

COMMENT

¶6. (C) While Chirac's visit was certainly a PR success for the French Embassy, his strong position on "genocide" recognition and Turkey's EU aspirations may make things uncomfortable for other high-level Western visitors who are reluctant to make such forceful statements. He also didn't aid the efforts of the rest of the Western diplomatic corps in Yerevan to push the GOAM hard on democracy as the elections approach. The UK Embassy, which often feels as besieged by the press as we do on the "genocide" issue told us that Chirac's actions "moved the goal post" and would likely make an upcoming ministerial visit more difficult.
GODFREY